

Louisiana State University LSU Digital Commons

LSU Master's Theses

Graduate School

2011

Finding inspiration in Invitation to a Beheading: a thesis on the creation and development of a one-person play

Joshua Ryan Dawes

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dawes, Joshua Ryan, "Finding inspiration in Invitation to a Beheading: a thesis on the creation and development of a one-person play" (2011). *LSU Master's Theses*. 1049.

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/1049

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.

FINDING INSPIRATION IN *INVITATION TO A BEHEADING*:
A THESIS ON THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF A ONE-PERSON PLAY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Joshua Ryan Dawes
B.S., Huntington University, 2006
May 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my family. Your constant support has given me the strength to pursue my passion in theatre. Mom and dad, your unending love for each other despite the hardships that you have faced together has been such an encouragement to me. I hope to have the sort of marriage one day that you have.

Becky Moss, thank you for instilling a love for the stage in me at such a young age. Without your passion for the arts, I might never have been inspired to study theatre in the first place. Thank you Don Rainbow, Michael Burnett, and David Shamburger for pushing me to pursue theatre professionally and helping me to obtain my first jobs.

Thank you to my dear friends in the M.F.A. Acting class of 2009 for helping me adapt to the trials of a master's program and being true friends to me during a year when I desperately needed friends. Many of you did not know the details of what I was dealing with back home, but you were always there to support me and make me laugh anyway. Scott Woltz, Leigh-Erin Balmer, Jessica Wu, Andrew Fafoutakis, Kenneth De Abrew, and Yohance Myles – thank you all so much.

Many thanks to all those faculty members and professors at Louisiana State University who have taken a chance on me and worked tirelessly to help make me a better artist. Nick Erickson, thank you for noticing me in the first place and for constantly being a strong supporter of my work on stage. You have taught me to work with the freedom that I need in my body and the movement piece during the dream section of 'Invitation' is dedicated to you. Thank you, Joanna Battles, for your countless hours of individual coaching to help me find my true voice

and get out of my own way. You have been a great help and a true friend during my time at LSU and I thank you.

Thanks also to Molly Buchmann for working to make me a stronger performer and helping me find the ‘presence’ that an actor needs to have to keep the attention of an audience. Rick Holden, thanks for your encouragement to seek bolder choices and to pursue more opportunities in the film arena. The filmed segments of the revised text included here is, in part, my attempt to follow your advice. John Fletcher and Les Wade, thank you both for pushing me to hone my skills as a writer and to better understand the power of the written word and its potential on stage. Your support inspired me to write this in the first place and I sincerely thank you both.

George Judy, you have been an inspiration to me since the day that I arrived in Louisiana. You are a brilliant performer and director and have helped me immensely in my time at LSU. One day, I hope to have the kind of impact on audiences and other artists that you do. Thank you.

Special thanks are also due to John Dennis. Your interest in me as an actor has been most appreciated. Your work with me on stage and outside of LSU has pushed me to make bolder choices and become a more interesting performer.

Most importantly, thank you to my father. Your strength and dedication to your family and your faith has proved to me that good things can come from terrible situations and that it is possible to be a man of character, even when life assaults you from every angle. Your never-ending devotion to mom and my brother, sister, and me has touched me deeper than I can say. One day, I hope to be half the man that you are and if I am every fortunate enough to be a husband and father, I hope to be one like you. This play is dedicated to you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	4
2.1 Creating Counter-Realities.....	4
2.2 Art and Tragedy.....	7
2.3 Development of a Secondary Character.....	9
3 FIRST DRAFT – ‘INVITATION’.....	12
3.1 Foreward to Solo Performance.....	12
3.2 Full Script of ‘Invitation’.....	12
3.3 Feedback from Performance.....	18
4 DISCOVERING AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT.....	20
4.1 Making it Personal.....	20
4.2 Letters as Literature.....	22
4.3 A Spiritual Journey.....	24
4.4 Dealing with Loss.....	26
5 NEW SCRIPT – ‘LETTERS FROM OXFORD’.....	27
5.1 Foreward to New Script.....	27
5.2 Full Script of ‘Letters from Oxford’.....	28
6 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAY.....	37
7 CONCLUSIONS.....	39
REFERENCES.....	41
APPENDIX: FACULTY EMAILS.....	42
VITA.....	44

ABSTRACT

Writing and performing a one-person play was selected as the basis for a thesis project in the spring semester of 2010 to be presented to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Theatre. The thesis will include an introduction, a review of the literature that inspired the original production, the full text of both scripts that were used, a chapter on the process of discovering a new play, a section about future plans for the play, and a conclusion. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the way that an actor may go about creating, performing, and revising a one-person play.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During the Spring 2010 semester, each of the candidates for the degree of Master's of Fine Arts in acting were enrolled in a class in Performance Theory, taught by Professor Wade. The purpose of this class was to examine the wide array of forms that theatre has taken since its origins, as well as the critical work that has been done to support or challenge those forms. We discussed the material, debating amongst ourselves the merits and challenges of performing each style of work, but the desire of the faculty was to lead each of us towards a deeper and more personal application of the ideas that we considered. And so, it was decided that the end of the semester would culminate in the presentation of our own series of solo projects that each of us would write, direct, and perform on our own.

The guidelines surrounding these projects were minimalistic by design. We had studied a wide range of theatrical styles during the preceding semester and it was now each student's task to determine the tone and content of the piece that he was to perform. The three primary objectives of the solo performances, however, were clearly established: to create and perform a piece of art that establishes the student as a serious theatre artist who is prepared to bring his own insight into the world, to demonstrate an understanding and mastery of the tools that are required for a fully-realized production, and to leave after graduation with a piece of material that has been created by the student and is able to be performed for theatre festivals or showcases for agents and casting directors.

At the start, the prospect of writing, self-producing, and performing my own one-man show seemed rather daunting. Most one-man shows that I had seen to this point struck me as being highly self-indulgent and often the best works were written by people who seemed to have

had much more colorful upbringings and bizarre life experiences than I have had. As a result, I hated the idea of performing anything remotely autobiographical as so many actors have done before.

Instead, I decided to search for those things that inspire me and hopefully use those as a jumping-off point for creating a work of my own that was important to me, but not specifically about my life. The first place that I turned in my search was to my love of literature. Since I was a child, I have loved reading and will read almost any sort of book that I can get my hands on. My favorites, however, have always been those classic works of fiction that follow the journey of an extraordinary individual.

One quote that kept coming to mind during my search for inspiration was from ‘The Middle Years’ by Henry James: “We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art” (“Middle” 620). Art itself is, naturally, another passion of mine and the idea of creating art and even depending on art to survive became a necessary motif in the story that I wanted to tell.

I continued to return to great works of art that had inspired me and came across *Invitation to a Beheading* by Vladimir Nabokov. The novel tells the story of a man named Cincinnatus C. who is imprisoned but is never given a clear description of his offense. He is only described as being ‘impervious to the rays of others... a lone dark obstacle in this world of souls transparent to one another’ (Nabokov 24). However, the main question in Cincinnatus’s story is not the nature of his crime, but the amount of time he has before his death sentence is carried out. Not being told how much time he has left to live, Cincinnatus finds himself unable to write because he does not know if he will have time to finish his work. Instead, he finds himself reverting to a

fiction of the mind where he can relive moments of his life or allow events to play out differently than they actually do.

For Cincinnatus, this is not a bad method of escape, as his life is far from desirable. He is not only sentenced to death for an indescribable crime, but his family is ashamed of him, his son is actually the son of a man whom his wife slept with, and his wife, Marthe, is implied to have had sex with at least 2 members of the prison staff in order to see him for a few minutes. And even as he approaches the moment when the one other prisoner that he has met will execute him, he escapes into his fantasy world, allowing the real world to crumble around him and embracing a place where there were other beings like himself.

Upon reading *Invitation to a Beheading*, I was struck by the power of Nabokov's words and his unique way of approaching art, the plight of a fallen and lonely man, and the juxtaposition of the real world and a fantasy world in this man's mind. I was still unsure about the direction that my solo performance would go, but I decided to use *Invitation to a Beheading* as a jumping-off point for developing a work of my own. And so, I began to break apart and adapt the text of Nabokov's great work first, in hopes that I would better focus my ideas and determine what exactly it was in this story that spoke to my heart – what story needed to be told.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Creating Counter-Realities

Upon witnessing the destruction of the Rheims cathedral, Henry James, in great anguish, wrote, ‘We must for dear life make our own counter-realities’ (“Bravest”). This concept is central to the journey of Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading*, as this central character is forced to remain in his cell, awaiting the day when he will be executed. His life has been a series of disappointments. His time in prison has been fraught with uncertainty and loneliness. The only escape Cincinnatus has is in his dream world, which is ‘so captivatingly majestic, free and ethereal, that afterwards it would be oppressive to breathe the dust of this painted life’ (Nabokov 92).

In order to capture a real glimpse into the mind of this man that I found so interesting, I knew that I would want to explore the creation of Cincinnatus’s dream world in a theatrical manner during my solo performance. In order to do this, I decided initially to follow the example of a theatrical company that I had studied in Performance Theory – the Kneehigh Theatre. This company does not often create brand new works from nothing, but seek instead to discover new ways to approach stories that the audience will likely know. Kneehigh is also known for having a nightmarish and surrealist quality, which is partly due to its commitment to employing actors with a wide array of skill sets so they may use an odd mix of dance, combat, gymnastics, clowning, live music, and video segments in their productions. I became resolved to use this concept of blending styles in my own show as well, in hopes that the varying styles would not only help establish this surreal effect, but also provide a separation in the minds of the audience members between the world of the prison and the world of Cincinnatus’s mind.

One of the ways in which I hoped to create this effect was by hanging a large projection screen on the upstage wall behind where I would stand for the majority of the performance. On this screen, I planned to play filmed segments of Cincinnatus, who quickly becomes known only as ‘the prisoner’ in my production to avoid a direct correlation between *Invitation to a Beheading* and my own piece, which would follow a slightly different path. The two options I had considered in using the video segments were to either run the segments for just those portions of the story when Cincinnatus is already in his dream state or to roll the film for the entire length of the production. In the both options, my plan was to attempt to play the reality of the cell and the fiction of his mind at the same time, so the prisoner would be seen simply sitting, sleeping, or writing at the same time that he is reliving past experiences, replaying life as it should have been, or imagining his escape from his cell.

The location of the ‘real world’ stage and the ‘dream world’ stage would alter during the course of the production in order to suggest to the audience that the walls between reality and fiction in the prisoner’s mind are disintegrating. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus explains that he has ‘grown accustomed to the thought that what we call dreams is semi-reality, the promise of reality, a foreglimpse and a whiff of it...they contain... more genuine reality than our vaunted waking life which, in its turn, is semi-sleep’ (Nabokov 92). By sometimes allowing the prisoner to simply sit on stage while a video over his head shows him outside of the cell and sometimes reversing this action so that the video is of the prisoner in his cell while the actor moves about the stage, I was hoping to raise the question of whether the reality of the body or the reality of the mind is, in fact, more real.

Another method I had considered in my attempt to utilize a number of theatrical elements and increase the stylistic diversity of my piece was that of using photography. In addition to

theatre, I personally have a great interest in photography and consider myself to be a decent amateur photographer. I had first hoped to incorporate photos on the projection screen during an opening sequence in which the prisoner would receive a newspaper from his jailor, which would be projected on the screen behind. The newspaper would consist exclusively of photos and stories about the prisoner, his family, and his upcoming execution. The other moment when I had planned to incorporate my photography was during a scene with M'sieur Pierre, a prisoner that Cincinnatus meets while in confinement, who turns out to be his executioner. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, there is a scene in which Pierre attempts to entertain Cincinnatus with a variety of bad magic tricks, puns, and photos of himself. I thought it would be funny to incorporate bits of this scene in the production, photographing myself in lots of funny locations and projecting them on the screen while the inmates looked over the photo album. However, as I began to narrow the focus of the story I wanted to tell later in the process, this scene was ultimately cut because while it was fun, it was an unnecessary and distracting element in comparison with the rest of the play.

In addition to the loss of the photographic elements of the production, ultimately the filmed segments were cut as well. This was a disappointment at first, as thematically and stylistically it seemed an important element in my work. However, in relation to the third objective of the project, creating a piece of material that can easily be taken to different locations, this much technology seemed impractical. It also began to become distracting and while I liked the concept behind playing two scenes at the same time, this would divide focus and could actually detract from the more important element of character building of this solitary man.

Not wanting to abandon the idea completely of using a variety of theatrical styles in my production, however, I continued to explore how I might play out the dream-like quality of the prisoner's mind. Instead of adding video elements to the production, which require extensive external equipment, I decided to add audio elements instead. This assisted me in creating the atmosphere of the prison and helped structure transitions between the numerous scenes in the play as well. The concept behind the dream world also shifted a bit as the structure of the segment changed. Instead of the prisoner doing one thing and going somewhere else in his mind, the dream world was played as an actual dream that he continually has – a dream of escape. This escape was based on Cincinnatus's imagined escape after visiting Pierre in his cell for the first time. The audio segment was recorded as if it were a segment of the prisoner's journal that was read aloud.

While the recording played, the prisoner moved around on stage, exploring the space in the style of interpretive physical theatre. He crawled through the space, as if stuck in a narrow cave, burst through an invisible gap in a wall, and played very low to the ground. This allowed for another bit of variety and helped to establish a dream-like state while keeping the technical requirements low and the attention on the actor instead of the production value.

2.2 Art and Tragedy

One of the greatest challenges that Cincinnatus has while he was in his cell is that he is not told how much time he has left. While fear of death is certainly a part of this struggle, the greater concern is that he is not able to write. Cincinnatus longs to record his thoughts, but he finds himself unable to do so because he is afraid that he will not have time to finish. Each day that passes, he regrets not beginning the day before, but he is still unable to begin. It is the

uncertainty of tomorrow that weighs on his mind and it paralyzes him. His only desire, he claims, is to express himself 'in defiance of all the world's muteness' (Nabokov 91).

The longing to write, to create, is not the only artistic element in Cincinnatus's life though. The mere creation of these dream worlds is artistic act. Cincinnatus writes his life like a work of fiction. I greatly desired that this artistic side of Cincinnatus should make it into the performance as well, so I added a short segment about Cincinnatus as a writer and in the end, as he is led away from the cell to be executed, I had him scatter his pages into the air as a final blow to the artistic creation that would never be seen.

Despite Cincinnatus's desperate need to express himself creatively in a mute world, the last thing that I wanted my piece to be was cliché. If the focus seemed to be nothing more than a man who defied death through his art, it could run the risk of sounding naïve and downplaying major disasters by suggesting that all wounds would heal with the application of the 'art band-aid'. Rather than simply trying to declare 'here is how art makes hardships bearable', I wanted to ask 'faced with life's hardships, does art help?'.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus never is able to write and the papers he does have are scattered when he is taken away from his prison. However, the art of his mind, his fictional dream world that he establishes, continues to the very end. At the end of his life, instead of facing the horror of his impending death, he asked himself why he was lying on the block waiting for his death and then answered by 'getting up and looking around' (Nabokov 222). The men who had imprisoned him began to shrink and his physical surroundings collapsed and turned to dust. He then made his way to where there 'stood beings akin to him' (Nabokov 223). In the moments before death, Cincinnatus's imagination helped him to cope by finally finding his place in the world. He was able to put off death in his mind and the reader is

reminded of a similar event during the hanging of Peyton Fahrquhar in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", who imagined an elaborate escape in the brief moments before his death (Bierce). In both cases, the mind is removed from the event of death, but the problem is not solved and the dreamer still dies.

So is art helpful during life's tragedies, when it does not have the power to fix the problem? This was a question that I wanted to ask members of the audience, not answer for them. So, I decided to take a stylistic deviation from *Invitation to a Beheading* and changed the ending. Instead of escaping the executioner's block at the last second and blissfully joining other visionaries, the prisoner in my performance remained on the block and finished the countdown himself. He had accepted his fate somewhat, but he still had to face his death head-on and could not escape the dark reality of a death at the hands of his only friend.

2.3 Development of a Secondary Character

M'sieur Pierre, Cincinnatus's fellow prisoner and executioner in *Invitation to a Beheading*, is certainly an intriguing character in the novel. While in a cell, he seems to be upbeat about his imprisonment, which may be due to his receiving noticeably better treatment than Cincinnatus ever does. He is confident, strong, and respectful to everyone around him and he encourages Cincinnatus to be more respectful to those men that are taking care of him in this prison. When his identity as the executioner is finally revealed, he explains that he has hidden the nature of his job in an attempt to not repel Cincinnatus, so that he might create an 'atmosphere of warm camaraderie...between the sentenced and the executor of the sentence' (Nabokov 173). In attempting to build this bond, he confesses that the two men grew to love

each other. This friendship, though it was initially built on deception, was so fascinating to me that I decided to explore this relationship in depth more in my solo performance.

One of the traps that I strove to avoid as I wrote Pierre into my script was that of making him seem like a villain from the start. In the novel, he is a bit of a show-off and he is so well renowned that one of the men running the prison is even described as ‘bestowing upon M’sieur Pierre a glance as moist as a kiss’ (Nabokov 174). At the execution, which is repeatedly referred to as a performance, Pierre becomes an entertainer and revels in his celebrity status. However, in my production, I felt that this was an unnecessary step and that it weakened the intrigue of the relationship between him and the prisoner to demonize Pierre. Pierre, in my piece, became a man who was forced to perform a task that he did not want to do because of his new-found brotherly love for the condemned.

He also brought a much-needed comic element to the production. There is an absurdity to the M’sieur Pierre of *Invitation to a Beheading* that I wanted to replicate in my production in order that my show would have more variety than it would with only a sobering gloom and darkness that one might expect from a story about a man condemned to death. When Pierre is first seen on stage, he is playing chess with the prisoner and quite obviously cheating. He speaks of his recent sexual conquests, knocks the game over when he thinks he has lost, and attempts to break the tension by performing a magic trick that he cannot actually do.

Other secondary characters in *Invitation to a Beheading* did not fare as well as M’sieur Pierre in my production. With the exception of a voice recording of a man who simply referred to himself as ‘the warden’, no other characters from the novel were written into my version of the show. The purpose of the piece, after all, was not to mimic the novel, but to adapt a great work of art that has inspired me and eventually discover the reason that this material spoke to me

in the first place. Due to the fact that Cincinnatus's name was dropped so that he was only known as a prisoner and narrator, Pierre was the only named character in the performance and developed into a central figure and the relationship between Pierre and the prisoner became the driving force of the play.

CHAPTER 3: FIRST DRAFT – ‘INVITATION’

3.1 Foreward to Solo Performance

The following section will provide a full text of the initial script that I wrote for use during the first performance of my solo project. As outlined in Chapter 2, it is based on Vladimir Nabokov’s novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, although much of the story is different from the Nabokov story. This performance was free for all audience members and was performed as the culmination of the work I had done in the Performance Theory class. The purpose of presenting it to an audience at this early stage was largely that I might be able to gain the valuable feedback from a live audience and discover what aspects of the production were of interest to outside viewers. I named this short version of the play ‘Invitation’ in honor of Nabokov’s masterpiece and the performance was approximately fifteen minutes in length.

3.2 Full Script of ‘Invitation’

VOICE OF WARDEN: ‘Attention: All prisoners - This is the warden reminding you of a few rules. One – leaving the prison is positively forbidden. Two – You are requested to remain silent between 1 and 3pm daily. Three – You are not allowed to entertain females. Four – You are not permitted to have dreams whose content is incompatible with the condition of the prisoner – such as of resplendent landscapes, outings with friends, family dinners, or sexual intercourse with persons who in real life would not allow you to come near. (Begin fading out when set is prepared) Five – Singing, dancing, and joking with the guards is permitted only by mutual consent. A prisoner’s meekness is a prison’s pride...’

Prisoner walks on from USL. He is struggling to be free of someone.

PRISONER: By Myself! (Sees block at USC, walks towards it and glares at executioner, who is SR of block. Kneels, places head on block, and his hands immediately cover the back of his neck) Wait! Just give me to the count of ten – I want to know when it will happen. (Removes his hands.) Ten...nine...eight...

(Lights shift to a tableau. A spotlight comes up on the Prisoner at the block.)

PRISONER: A beheading? (Lifts his head off block) But my head is so comfortable. (Grips at his heart, which is pounding) Sh-sh-sh-sh....it's nothing. (to audience) I've been waiting here for – months? Years? Maybe my whole life... And I don't even remember why I'm here. But the worst thing – is that they won't tell me WHEN. When will I die? What day and time? The compensation for a death sentence is knowledge of the exact hour when one is to die – a great luxury, but one that is well-earned! (Crossing to desk, DSL) I want to write my story, record my thoughts, but I'm afraid that I won't be able to finish in time. They say 'maybe tomorrow', but tomorrow comes and I'm still here thinking 'if only I'd begun yesterday, I might have had enough time to finish'... (to 'jailors' – the audience) And I don't mean to complain... but is there anything that might be considered an assurance? You never keep your word. You never keep your word. You never keep your word. Can there be any security or pledge you might make or is the very

idea of a guarantee unknown here? Is it my turn, Pierre? (Crosses to SR area, sits on chair DS of table where chessboard is set up) Is it my turn, Pierre?

(Tableau – change to Pierre, switch seats)

VOICE OF PRISONER: ‘Eight...seven...six...’

(Lights up on DSR area)

PIERRE: (Spoken while playing a game of chess) It’s your turn. Come on, quickly, good players do not take a long time to think – Women. Well, I’m a bachelor myself, so of course I understand... not like there’s much of a chance to meet women in here – hey, wait a minute, that was an oversight. Let me take back my move. Here...this is better. Yeah, I’d say you’re stuck with me until that day when we’ll both ascend the scaffold together, haha – Wait, why can’t my pawn take it? Oh, I see. Clever. Alright, I’ll retreat. – I do miss them though. I am a great aficionado of women...and the way they love me... Well, that was a snide move on your part! You must warn your opponent. Here, let me change my last move. – I recently had sex with a remarkably...healthy individual. What do you mean, “Checkmate”? Why “Checkmate”? Wait a minute...what was the position? No, the one before that. Alright, I’ll move here. – Anyways, the women I miss, but really it’s not so bad here. Just try to enjoy yourself and stop spending all of your time dreaming of your grand escape. It’s only in fairy tales that someone escapes from prison. – No, put that piece back and let me think. You, it seems, are cheating. I believe

this piece stood here...or maybe here (Knocks over board). Well, the game was mine anyway...you make one mistake after another. (Grabs deck of cards, trying to recover) You want to see a trick? (Pulls card off top of deck and shows it to him) Memorize this card. Got it? (Inserts card into middle of deck, shuffles deck, pulls out a card at random) There! No?

(Tableau.)

VOICE OF PRISONER: ‘Seven...six...five...’

(Lights up on DSL area. PRISONER is sitting at desk, writing.)

PRISONER: ‘Every night the same dream. I am lying in my bed...

(Tableau. Lights up on PRISONER – movement piece will happen with text, moving from DSR to USL.)

VOICE OF PRISONER: (continuing)... waiting for the executioner to arrive and take me away.

My heart begins thumping violently (Sound effect gets louder – ‘Bang bang, bang bang, BANG! BANG!’) The vibrations shake the room around me and the wall behind me cracks open just enough for me to squeeze through. I am in a narrow tunnel and soon it becomes impossible for me to turn around. I shout back for my cellmate, my friend, to join me – to escape with me before it is too late – but he doesn’t respond. I must press on

– death is chasing me. I am forced to crawl as the passage narrows. The surface along which I am crawling begins to slope. I glimpse a reddish chink ahead and catch a whiff of dampness and mold, as though I’ve passed from the bowels of the fortress wall into a natural cave. The ceiling is low and bats hang everywhere like wrinkled fruit. I press on and the chink in the wall opens in a blaze of light and a breath of fresh air. Freedom is waiting! I burst through!

PRIS: ‘And find that I have burrowed into another cell that is identical to my own – right down to the man fast asleep in the bunk above mine. Pierre?’

(Tableau.)

VO: ‘Six...five...four...

(Lights up SR/center.)

PIERRE: You seem to be in a good mood today – that’s good! – because there’s something I want to talk with you about. I’ve been thinking about dying a lot...and this whole process just seems...barbaric – the prisoner and executioner – two complete strangers – meet face to face only at the last moment. It’s like one of those ancient wedding ceremonies, which were really a kind of human sacrifice, when the submissive virgin was hurled by her parents into the tent of a stranger – and it makes me sick. Which is why, in order that we might have the friendliest possible relations, I moved into this gloomy cell – in the guise

of a prisoner – like you. I know that this is unpleasant, but I don't want our friendship to be poisoned by this one drop of bitterness...so I ask your forgiveness. We've passed long evenings together in talks and games – you've told me of your failed marriage...I've taught you the art of chess – we've grown to LOVE each other, so now I'll know the structure of your soul just as well as the structure of your neck. And it will not be an unfamiliar, terrible somebody – but a tender friend who will help you take those final steps. And you can surrender yourself to me – without fear.

(Tableau.)

VO: 'Five...four...three...'

PRISONER: But we don't have to go this very minute, do we? I haven't quite prepared myself... My last wish! I get a last wish, don't I? I just want to finish writing something – give me three minutes – just a three minute intermission and after that, I'll act to the end my role in your idiotic production. (Rushes to desk and tries to write – as he speaks, other people come on and strip away the entire set except the block – one has a large broom and is sweeping the floor) (to audience) I try to write, but the guards cleaning out my cell are making too much noise. They carry out my books and begin sweeping the floor, when one of them knocks out the whole grating in the recess of the window – a gust of fresh air enters the cell and my papers fly off the table (He knocks the papers to the floor, which are immediately swept up). I notice plaster falling from the ceiling and a crack describing a tortuous course along the wall. The cell, no longer needed, appears to

be disintegrating. (to jailors) Just an instant more. I find it ludicrous and disgraceful that my hands should tremble so – but I can neither stop nor hide it. My papers you will destroy, the rubbish you will sweep out, and nothing of me will remain within these four walls. But now dust and oblivion are nothing to me. I feel only one thing – fear, fear, shameful, futile, fear... (Prisoner is dragged off USL)

(The following is a repeat of beginning sequence with just a couple of minor changes.)

PRISONER: By myself! (Still struggling to be freed from someone. Sees block USC and begins walking towards it. Sees executioner and his demeanor softens – a look of recognition, pain, and acceptance. He removes his shirt, kneels at block and does not cover neck. Places head on block and speaks calmly.) Three...two...

(Blackout.)

3.3 Feedback from Performance

The audience was extremely receptive to the performance from what I could tell during the performance. Everybody seemed entertained and several people spoke to me afterwards, encouraging me to push this idea further because they found it very powerful. The faculty was very supportive of this first performance as well. George Judy, Head of the M.F.A. Acting program, told me that my solo project is ‘incredibly ambitious’ and that it ‘promises the potential for a terrific thesis project’.

Professor Les Wade had some more detailed feedback regarding the performance and its future as a re-constructed and expanded one-man show. He also said that he found the piece effective, but that he would encourage me to depart from the text of the novel more in my expanded one-man show so I can add in more of my own moments. Time to go into the relationship more between these two men also is necessary as he thought that ‘the movement to the enlightenment moment, where the prisoner embraces Pierre, comes a bit too quickly’ (Wade 1) This was a particular challenge with this initial script, as there was essentially one scene when the audience sees the two men as friends and the next scene that they are together, Pierre confesses his identity as the executioner. It is certainly a bit abrupt and Professor Wade encouraged me to continue to focus on the relationship between the two men for the expanded show and let go some of the philosophical musings of the prisoner.

After all, Professor Wade observed that the central character was not the prisoner himself, but Pierre. This cellmate and executioner was ‘the most engaging and strongest element of the piece’ which seemed to gain energy when he was on stage (Wade 1). Perhaps this was partly due to my relinquishing the idea of using the technical elements that I had originally planned on incorporating, but he also noted that the theme of the prisoner’s fantasy and world of his creation did not come through very strongly during this attempt, but that it didn’t matter because the core of the play was still the friendship of these two seemingly condemned men.

CHAPTER 4: DISCOVERING AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT

4.1 Making it Personal

Taking the advice Professor Wade gave me to depart from the text more and make the story more personal to me and more full of my own moments, I began thinking more about why I had been attracted to *Invitation to a Beheading* in the first place. And I realized after thinking about the essential elements of the story. A man is in prison awaiting answers when he meets another prisoner whom he befriends. When only this much of the story is taken into account, the story strangely mirrors a similar one from my own life.

Just months before entering graduate school, I drove my own father to a federal prison in Oxford, Wisconsin. He had been fighting a legal battle for a couple of years beforehand and on the day of his trial, he was given a sentence of more than a year. He was treated well during his time in Wisconsin and was given ample amounts of free time while he was there, but he was still lonely for the majority of his first months there. After some time, he met a fifty-two year old man named Andre` who had already been at that prison for fifteen years. The two men became friends and Andre` was able to help my dad physically, mentally, and spiritually during their time together. Andre` was a strong man and knew a lot about weight training and the friendship between him and my father grew primarily because Andre` had decided to train my father and get him in the best physical shape of his life. During this time, they also talked and Andre` told my father a lot about learning to live on ‘the inside’.

Spiritually, Andre` helped keep my father from feeling alone. My father is a Christian man, but he had felt let down by the church, which had seemed to abandon him once he was convicted of his crime. Personally, I believe I had been struggling with this aspect more than my

father to begin with though. I grew up in the church and consider myself to be a Christian as well, but I have doubted these beliefs repeatedly and after watching my father be mistreated by those involved in the legal system and abandoned by those in the church that were supposed to be his friends and spiritual partners, I had become quite cynical and had almost no faith left in humanity. The spiritual journey of the primary prisoner in the new one-man show was not my father's; it was mine.

As I thought about the parallels between this experience in my life that had affected me so much over the last few years and the one of Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading*, I was amazed that I had never noticed this connection before. It seems perfectly obvious to me now that my connection to Cincinnatus and my deep interest in his journey was largely due to the concern that I had been carrying around for my own family. Naturally, many elements of Nabokov's story do not resemble my father's experience at all. My father was never sentenced to death, Andre' is not a government employee like Pierre, and unlike Cincinnatus, my father had a multitude of friends and family members that flooded his mailbox daily with cards and letters, letting him know that he was not alone.

I decided at this point that while I had desperately tried to not make this autobiographical when originally conceiving the solo performance, it had become biographical instead, with the primary character being my father and the other major character being Andre'. Their story was the one that I wanted to tell now, so I made the decision to start from scratch. *Invitation to a Beheading* had inspired my solo performance, 'Invitation', which helped me focus on what element specifically I wanted to tell from my father's incarceration – his developing a strong, beautiful friendship with Andre'. The new show was renamed 'Letters from Oxford' in honor of my father and Andre'.

4.2 Letters as Literature

While in prison, my father began writing as a way to pass the time and collect his thoughts. After seeing the number of people that were concerned about his well-being and curious about the experiences that he was having on a daily basis, he decided to compile these musings and address them to the people that cared about him in the form of a newsletter. There were eleven newsletters that were printed during his time at Oxford and these letters became an important resource for me as I began to work on my new script. Each of the letters had separate categories, like mini-chapters, that were included. They were ‘To all my friends and loved ones’, ‘Daily life’, ‘Things you learn in camp’, ‘Book chapter titles’, ‘Where God has worked’, ‘Books read’, ‘Specific notes to individuals’, ‘Mileage and weight updates’, ‘Enjoying the stars’, and ‘Prayer desires and thanks’. In my attempt to formulate a new story that stayed more true to my father’s experience, these chapters became crucial elements for me to include.

‘To all my friends and loved ones’, ‘Specific notes to individuals’, and ‘Prayer desires and thanks’ are sections of the newsletter that, naturally, communicate directly to the readers of the newsletter and typically used as a way to thank people that had visited or helped take care of our family in some way. Being separated for such a long time from everyone that he cared about, my father grew passionate about encouraging people to not take the people or other blessings in their lives for granted. His section of the newsletter entitled, ‘Enjoying the stars’ was dedicated to that idea alone, as he spoke in each newsletter of the little things that he missed in life, such as having the opportunity to walk outside at night and look up at the stars. ‘Where God has worked’ filled a similar purpose, as my father used this section in order to focus on the little blessings we all receive in life rather than living under the burden of all our problems.

Another way that my father decided to help encourage his readers was by demonstrating that it was never too late to make a fresh start at life. Before entering the prison at Oxford, my father had only read a couple of books in the 25 years since he had graduated from college. He also had put on some weight and the stress of the years leading up to his imprisonment had caused him to gain even more weight and he began to feel very out of shape. In an attempt to fill his time while in prison, he decided to begin reading again and working out almost every day so that he could make use of his time and better himself while he was inside. During the year that he spent in prison, he walked over 3,000 miles, read 100 books, and, thanks to some help from Andre', became the strongest he has been since his college days. 'Books read' and 'Mileage and weight updates' focus specifically on these topics and were a source of encouragement for readers at home who sometimes feel discouraged about their lives.

Finally, the remaining category of sections include 'Daily life', 'Things you learn in camp', and 'Book chapter titles'. These sections were not meant to be encouraging or uplifting as much as they were to be informative and entertaining. The ridiculous rules in a prison are everywhere and the best way to cope with them sometimes is to simply laugh at them. 'Daily life' focused on the average day in the life of a prisoner, which answered a lot of questions from curious readers. It also pointed out some of the absurdities of this routine, like having the meals each day at 6am, 10am, and 3:30pm so that everyone was hungry at night and more inmates were inclined to risk stealing food from the kitchens when they got a chance. 'Things you learn in camp' was more focused on interesting stories, absurd rules, and the injustices that are evident in the justice system. 'Book chapter titles' was one of my favorite sections as my father, inspired by all the books that he was reading, began making lists of chapter titles that he would use if he

ever decided to write a book about his time in a federal prison. They are creative and interesting and I became determined to use some of them in my one-man show.

Stylistically, this last section, 'Book chapter titles', became instrumental to the development of my show, as I took it upon myself to write the one-man show as if it were segments from my father's book, narrated by him. This would include a prologue, epilogue, and three large chapters in between. My thought was that this would help, not only with telling my father's story in an interesting way, but in backing up my original theme from 'Invitation' of turning to art during a time of crisis.

In addition to the newsletters, my father wrote letters home to my siblings, my mother, and me. After he was released from prison, he began writing letters to Andre', who must serve a few more years still. Andre' has also written to our family several times and considers us his family. Some of the dialogue used between Andre' and my father is adapted from these letters between the two of them since my father's release.

4.3 A Spiritual Journey

As mentioned earlier, the spiritual journey of the prisoner in the revised one-man show is my journey more than it is my father's. My father is a strong Christian who, while he may have lost some of his faith in humanity and the United States justice system, did not lose his faith in God. The faith that I lost was more in regards to the people that claim to be Christians. When my father was indicted, he told a few people from the church first, hoping for a support group as he and his family were about to go through an extremely trying time. Several of these friends that he had trusted most seemed to turn their backs on him, distancing themselves from him as much as possible. Whether this was more due to self-centeredness and negligence or fear of

associating themselves with someone who was in legal trouble, these people chose to separate themselves from us instead. In addition to losing trust in those people that should have supported us, I quickly grew cynical about the typical response most Christians gave when we asked for help, which was to simply say ‘We will be praying for you’ and do nothing themselves. From what we could tell, prayer alone had not been solving anything as every ‘worst case scenario’ that our lawyer discussed with our family quickly became our reality. These offers of prayer without any other support felt utterly shallow and superficial, a way of feigning concern without getting involved in the least.

Once my father was in prison, he encountered an unofficial prison organization known as the newcomers ministry, which is actually a better group than it is painted to be in ‘Letters from Oxford’. The group itself was not merely a bunch of swindlers, but a group of men who remembered how difficult it was to get acclimated to prison and were determined to offer assistance to the new inmates during their first weeks on the inside. The corruption was not the normal in this charitable Christian organization, but in virtually every prisoner inside the camp, regardless of moral or spiritual standards. Almost everyone stole food, bent rules, and lied about underhanded things that they saw on the inside and this lack of morality, while understandable from these prisoners who were suffering at the hands of their illogical and unconcerned government wards, made me further realize the frustrating lack of difference between those who claim to be men of God and those that do not.

Andre` proved to be an inspiration, both to my father and to me. His cheerfulness, love for others, and selflessness were unequalled amongst the men in prison. In just a few months, he became one of my father’s closest friends and we now consider him a part of our family. He is a Christian man as well, but what I have seen from him has not been a relentless adherence to a

doctrine or desire to appear as if he has everything together. People already know he has made some big mistakes because he is in prison, so this Christian pride does not come into account as it does with many of the people we know outside of prison. His religion is a religion of love and his beliefs are centered around treating other people right, being a good man, and showing love and loyalty to those in his life that are important to him. His encouragement to my dad was to be the man his family needed him to be – a good husband, father, and son.

4.4 Dealing with Loss

One year after my father finally returned home, his mother was tragically killed in an automobile accident. She was a loving woman who cared deeply for other people and was always supportive to those facing hardships. She had stood beside our family during my father's year in prison and had also written faithfully to Andre` both during the time that my father was inside with him and after he was released. The day that she died, there were only 3 possessions that were found on her in her car, one of which was a letter to Andre` that she was taking to the post office. Andre` described her as the 'salt of the earth' and I knew that a portion of the story of my father and Andre` would include my deceased grandmother now. The epilogue seemed the best place to include this element and as the script stands now, this is the final piece in a story that focuses on how friendship and love help make some of life's great tragedies bearable. I have no doubt that my grandmother would have wanted us all to continue living our lives and loving each other. This play is also a tribute to her and the great love she has shown countless people over the course of her life.

CHAPTER 5: NEW SCRIPT – ‘LETTERS FROM OXFORD’

5.1 Foreward to New Script

The following script is, as of this moment, still a work in progress. Part of what I have learned during this process of creating my own solo performance is that part of the joy of this work is that it has the potential to continue to evolve over time. My life will change, as will the way that I view events that have taken place and the manner in which I tell my story. This script has not yet been performed before a live audience, as I am hesitant to perform it before it is truly ready and before I am ready to perform it. There will, undoubtedly, be future revisions of this script with the intent that it may, one day, be a fully formed one-man show that I can perform for live audiences and agents. In the meantime, I have found that I need some time away from this situation before I am able to execute it in the way that I want.

In terms of the structure of the piece, the reader will notice the return to the idea of using multimedia elements in the performance. The concept behind this was that the story itself would be a book that my father wrote about his time in prison and the headings on the projection screen would serve as chapter titles of the book. The filmed segments would be memories, whether they were of Andre`, his pastor, or his lawyer. The fact that the same actor is playing each of these roles in different costumes is not only a necessary function of performing a one-man show, but it also is meant to aid in telling these segments as another method of my father’s storytelling. A recorded voice was used once again in this new script as well, but instead of it being the voice of a warden that the audience never meets, it is the voice of Andre`. There is also a short line recorded by the guard that is simply used as a transitional element. Music has also made its way into this production, as it is not meant to feel quite as bleak as ‘Invitation’.

5.2 Full Script of ‘Letters from Oxford’

(“Prologue” will flash on the projection screen. ‘Prologue will then fade out and LAWYER VIDEO will play.)

LAWYER: “At this stage, I don’t think you should be worrying quite so much. Yes, you’ve just been indicted, but anyone can be indicted. They could indict a grilled cheese sandwich if they wanted to! Of course, it would never go to trial – but that’s what happens most of the time. Chances are that we will be able to settle this outside of court. If we do have to go before a judge, however, we should plead “guilty”. No, no... I don’t think you’re guilty, but 99% of federal cases are decided in favor of the state-employed prosecutor. Usually before the trial actually begins. AND if you plead “not guilty” in a federal case and LOSE, they add “perjury” to your list of crimes and your sentence will likely be tripled. It should never get to that point though – really, you should be just fine.”

(“Good Friday” by Josh Garrels will begin playing from the 5:00 mark, FADE IN. Video disappears and song begins, the following text will scroll in, as in the opening credits of a historical film - “Oxford Federal Prison – Oxford, Wisconsin”)

(Opening Credits fade, “Chapter One: Looking Back” fades up on screen, Lights slowly fade in at center stage as the Prisoner walks to center stage with a mop and bucket and begins cleaning the floor.)

“Chapter One: Looking Back” (alternate titles are “Working behind the wire of freedom” and “Life at Camp”)

(When Prisoner reaches center stage and begins mopping, the screen will go blank, the music will fade out, and the lights will come up to full.)

PRISONER: (LIVE) “Welcome to ‘camp’. That’s what we’re all told to call this place.

“Prison” is too ugly a word, I guess. This particular camp is located in a small town in Wisconsin called “Oxford” – like the university – but there are no real thinkers here. At least not on the outside of these bars. This place isn’t like the prisons you see on tv – we have some freedom here – as long as we don’t cause problems we can come and go from our cells during the day, even play sports outside during the afternoon rec hours. Most of the guys in here are in for financial crimes or drugs – in fact, if the government legalized marijuana, 40% of the cells in this place would be emptied overnight. We’re allowed to leave our cells during the day for brief periods to workout, visit the library or chapel, and buy snacks and supplies from the commissary – as long as I’m in the cell every few hours during the count, and I do my job every day. Of course, the pay isn’t great, so buying things is still difficult. For my job, mopping the halls and visitor lobby, I get paid a whopping 12 cents an hour! Stop laughing – it’s true! My first month’s paycheck will be \$5.25 FOR THE MONTH. Prison is where they coined the phrase ‘Another day, another dollar.’ Still, the hardest thing about being here has to be the loneliness – the separation from everyone I care about and the realization that a lot of the people who I thought were friends really don’t care when the chips are down. I remember telling my pastor, a man

who had been my best friend for most of my adult life, about my prison sentence before I came here...

(PASTOR VIDEO plays on projection screen, while lights on Prisoner dim slightly.)

PASTOR: “Wow. Thank you so much for sharing this with me. You should know that you are not alone in this. The church will be behind you in this... and so will I. You’ve been one of my closest friends for twenty years – and I want to do anything I can to support you and be here for you and your family. Can I pray for you?”

(Video goes to black immediately as a VOICEOVER of a guard plays and the Prisoner walks off as lights dim.)

GUARD: “Mail Call! Dawes – You’ve got two letters, one from your wife and one from your mother. That’s it.”

“Chapter Two: Cooking, Contraband, and Cadillacs” (OR ‘Camp Religion – Lie, Steal, & Extort’)

(Prisoner return to stage as lights raise. He crosses to his bunk. As he enters, “Chapter Two: Cooking, Contraband, and Cadillacs” (OR ‘Camp Religion – Lie, steal, & extort’) flashes on projection screen.)

PRISONER: “No word ever came from him. Not a single letter or visit. And he wasn’t alone – I couldn’t believe how many people I had considered to be friends turned their backs on me the second I was down. And somehow, as a pastor – a “man of God” – I expected him to be better than the rest. Not so much. Even in here, there is really not a big difference between the guys that are Christians and those that aren’t. One guy came to visit last week. I was just laying in bed, reading, when he came into my room:

(Prisoner acts out the role of ‘Christian Inmate’)

CHRISTIAN INMATE: “Hey, you’re Dawes, right? Heard there was a new guy in this wing. Some of the guys said they saw you walking on the track while they were playing ball. Figured you might want some better shoes than those workboots they give you when you get in if you’re gonna be out walking a lot. (Hands him a pair of old running shoes) Not much – I’ve been wearing ‘em for 6 months now. Better than nothing though.

PRISONER: (As himself) “ I thought that was nice of him – giving me his old shoes. Said he was part of a ‘ministry’ in the camp – a bunch of Christians who try to help the new guys by getting them a few essentials – shoes, a new toothbrush, bars of soap, and clothes that fit. That’s not exactly all they did though.

CHRISTIAN INMATE: “We also can get you some food, if you want – I got some pizza in my room if you want it – we’ve got a couple of guys that work in the kitchen and they’ve gotten pretty good about swiping some food every day. Put only a little cheese in the

omelets for breakfast and take the rest – soon you’ve got enough for a pizza. Yesterday, I got some bread, cheese and a can of tomato paste. The other day, Mike got 40 bananas at breakfast – he’s the best. And oh man – your bunk... would you be interested in a Cadillac mattress? Only a few of ‘em around... they’re a little bigger and it’s easier to hide some food and cigarettes inside ‘em. Probably only cost ya about 50 bucks if you wanna swap for a Cad... Whaddaya say?

PRISONER: “Well, I have to admit, I kept the shoes... but I wasn’t exactly eager to get in on the Robin Hood-style underground resistance these guys were doing... and the more people I met, the more I realized I didn’t really have anyone I could trust on the inside... until I met Andre’.

(PRISONER turns around and faces projection screen. Lights dim on PRISONER, but do not go fully out. “Chapter Three: Andre’” Flashes across screen. Then, this title fades out and ANDRE’ VIDEO ONE plays.)

“Chapter Three: Andre’”

ANDRE’ VIDEO ONE: Dawesy, listen... you’ve gotta stop worrying about these friends of your that let you down. Just let it go – people screw up. They let you down because they are more interested in their own lives than yours. Let it be a reminder for you of the loyalty you want to show to your friends though. Be loyal. You will fail at it. You have already. A man who does not know loyalty, from both ends, does not know men.

Loyalty is not a matter of give and take – ‘He did me a favor, therefore I owe him one’...No! No! NO! It is the recognition of a bond, the honoring of history, the reemergence of the vows we make in tight times. It doesn’t mean complete agreement or invisible blood ties. It is the currency of selflessness, given without expectation and capable of the most stellar return. In the meantime...you need to build a routine for yourself. Once you get a routine in here, your time will fly. You mop the floors, you eat when they say and sleep when you can, but it’s the rest of the day that you need to schedule. Read as many books as you can. Maybe try to play some ball with the other guys in here. I know you’ve been walking – keep it up! And you should start lifting weights with me too. Use this time to get back in shape again – DJ is gonna love me for it!

(Video goes to black and the prisoner turns back around to address the audience.)

PRISONER: Andre` has been such an inspiration for me – for one, he’s been helping me train.

He said he wants to get me in shape for DJ – my wife. I told him all about my family and he said he wants to meet them. I told my family about him too and both my wife and mom have already written to him. I’ve kept walking and am now often walking about 13 miles every day. I read a couple of new books every week and I’ve even started a newsletter of my own. One day, I may try to compile my thoughts about this place and write a book. I did try to play on a softball team – THAT was interesting. You should have been there – I played with this guy named Punkin. Well, his real name was Warren...but he decided that in here, he was Punkin – I think it fit him better...

(Prisoner does his impersonation of Punkin.)

PUNKIN: Hey! Hey, Dawesy! Man – move over. To your left – look, I know you’re playing Center Field, but Candy-Ass over there in Right can’t catch. Alright, alright – come on...Hey batter, right here. Put it right here – hey! Damn it, you’re walking him? He can’t hit! I saw him last week! Are you scared of him, you stupid fu_____ (pulls off glove to throw at him) hi, warden...No, everything’s fine. (throws glove on ground instead) Just a little tired of this game. (lies down on the ground) PLAY BALL!

PRISONER: Wasn’t really sure how to handle that... I mean, if your Left-Fielder lies down during a game, are you supposed to shift? Don’t think I’m gonna be best friends with Punkin either.

(Lights on Prisoner go black. ANDRE` VIDEO TWO plays on screen.)

ANDRE` VIDEO TWO: Ok, so maybe you should stay away from playing ball right now heard Punkin actually got the basketball tournament cancelled because he picked a fight with a ref! Anyways, you’re getting out soon anyways... man, I’m gonna miss you. I mean, I’m happy for you though – your freedom is my freedom. It’s like a part of me is being set free too. I’ve been blessed with a true friend in you. Your mother sent me a letter yesterday. I sense such genuineness in her...when I finished reading her letter, all I could say was that she’s the ‘salt of the earth’. So, when you see her on the outside, give

her my love and let her know how her constant support through her writing made me feel supported and a bit less alone in here. She's a wonderful woman and I hope I get to meet her and your dad some day. As for DJ, you already know, my friend. She is one of the purest souls I've ever known. Such compassion. Ya know, there's a saying in here that's used to glorify a man's woman. This is the type of woman that sticks by her man come hell or high water and will ride with her man to the end of the earth or die trying. This woman is called a "ride-or-die-chick". This is what I call DJ. Take care of her. Appreciate her.

(ANDRE` VIDEO TWO turns off and "Epilogue" flashes on the screen.)

"Epilogue"

(Prisoner walks onstage in 'normal' clothes with a letter in hand.)

PRISONER: 'During my year at Oxford, I read over 100 books and walked over 3,000 miles.

And I left with one friend I'll never forget. A year after I got home, my mother was killed in an automobile accident. A teenage girl was speeding down a country road while texting and blew through a stopsign at 60 mph. Among the wreckage, I found this letter. My mother had written it to Andre` and was on the way to the post office to mail it. Nothing remarkable – she just talks of life on the farm. 'This spring has been a challenge in the garden. With so much rain, the corn & green beans are struggling to get up. I've replanted once already. Sometimes, I wonder why I'm even concerned about the garden.

It's in my blood. It's therapy. Would love to hear from you again soon, but we are awaiting the day we can see you in person. Take care – stay strong – and know that God loves you and we do as well. Love, Theda Dawes' (Theda 2).

(The prisoner leaves the stage as a voice-over of Andre' on the phone plays through and a few pictures flash on the screen of my grandma, Andre', and my family visiting my father in prison. The voiceover will be difficult to get, as Andre' is in prison still, but it's my hope that this will be a part of the last image.)

(After photos are shown and V/O plays, "Bigger than Us" by Andy Davis will play and slowly fade out as the stage goes to black.)

"And love is something
Something bigger than us
Bigger than us..."

Blackout.

CHAPTER 6: FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAY

The obvious first step in the continuing process that is the development of this play is to revise and perform the new script for an audience. Audiences received the initial performance of ‘Invitation’ warmly. Several faculty members and students expressed that the ideas behind the show were powerful and worth exploring further. This encouragement, along with the previously mentioned feedback from Professor Les Wade about focusing the piece more on Pierre and making it more personal to me, proved to be valuable resources as I returned to the writing process. Eventually, this will be a step that the new version of the script needs as well.

I have also given consideration to the different avenues that this script could take in future developments. At this point, it still feels a bit too much like an autobiographical story, rather than a complete theatrical event. A likely reason for this is that I fear, in staying true to most of the details from my father’s time in the federal prison at Oxford, I have stripped the play of its danger. My father was never in danger of being executed and while this play is still powerful to me because I lived out the events detailed in it, a man wrestling with his loss of faith in God and humanity is simply not as dire as a man who is moments away from being beheaded attempting to come to terms with death at the hands of a friend. This is why I struggled initially with the concept of writing a one-man show. Basing the story on events from my life were certain to make me feel a deeper connection with the material, but even the worst events in my life do not compare with the fiction that a man like Nabokov can write.

A possible change in this area would be to begin blending the fiction world of *Invitation to a Beheading* and ‘Invitation’ with the largely non-fiction world of ‘Letters from Oxford’. Perhaps a version of the play remains to be written wherein the prisoner of ‘Letters from Oxford’

receives a much more serious sentence and is not released at the end of the play, but remains in prison, facing an unknown future.

Stylistically, I have also considered attempting to revise 'Letters from Oxford' so that it, like 'Invitation' does not have the multimedia aspects that are currently written into the script. I have always liked the idea of including video, music, and photos that I have taken, but in a one-person show format this does have the tendency to draw attention away from the only actor on stage at the time and runs the risk of being gimmicky.

Thus far, the idea that has stuck with me the longest is that of rewriting 'Letters from Oxford' as a longer show with a larger cast. While this defeats the initial purpose of having a solo showcase piece, available to agents at a moment's notice, it also would allow me to flesh out some of the other characters more. The audience would care more about the relationships that my father has with his wife, his mother, and Andre` if these characters are allowed more stage time than they are at the moment and the audience is able to see two actors relating to each other, rather than one man playing both roles or simply reading letters aloud. The power of a one-person show is that it can highlight the talents of a single actor, but I am inclined to think that more actors on stage would serve the story more and that is my purpose as a writer.

Allowing more people on stage could also allow for the piece to take on the stylistic qualities that I have desired all along. As with the Kneehigh Theatre, the play could use the talents of the various actors and the scattered technical elements available in order to create an entertaining and powerful theatrical event. Whether or not this adaptation would be more successful is impossible to know until I receive more audience feedback on both versions, but it is the next area that I would like to explore with this text.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

The fascinating element of this project for me was the way in which the script continually adapted in ways I had not expected. Upon receiving the assignment, I shuddered at the idea of presenting a one-person show, as most of these sorts of performances are not to my liking. They are often largely autobiographical and I certainly felt pushed in that direction at times. The last thing that I wanted to do was perform something that was about me though, so I sought to perform something fictional that spoke to me instead.

As I reflected on the piece after the initial performance of ‘Invitation’, it was then that I realized how personal this fictional script was to me and I decided to honor that symmetry. Thus, despite my initial wishes, I found myself writing a piece that was becoming ever more autobiographical with each revision. ‘Letters from Oxford’ was largely based on events that had unfolded just a few years ago and much of the dialogue was derived from actual conversations that took place on the phone or via letters.

This transformation from fictional to non-fictional was surprising to me and in many ways, it made the performance of my one-person play much more difficult. For me, the events that took place during my first year of graduate school when my father was in prison are still very near and I found that I was having real challenges in tackling the work as an actor. I spoke with George Judy, my primary acting instructor, about this difficulty and he suggested that he thought I needed more time and distance from the events before I was emotionally ready to tackle the play that I had written.

This close proximity to the material also made the editing process of writing ‘Letters from Oxford’ much more difficult than I had experienced before. Perhaps it is because I am

afraid of dishonoring my father, grandmother, or Andre` in some way. The last thing that I want is to cause more pain for my family in the retelling of some of our most painful moments. Also, as I am part of the story that I am telling, it is difficult for me to have the distance required to analyze the text as a theatrical piece as easily as I would have otherwise. Deciding what parts need to be told and what or who should be cut from the performance feels nearly impossible for me at this point in my life. Once these wounds have healed a bit, I hope to be able to take on the challenge of revising this story again and performing it as either a one-person play or a part of a larger play with a full cast. In the meantime, I will stick to writing fiction and performing in works written by other playwrights.

REFERENCES

- Bierce, Ambrose. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." *Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce: Volume II*. New York: Neale, 1909. 27-45. Print.
- Davis, Andy. "Bigger Than Us." *Thinks of Her*. Independent Bands, 2004. CD.
- Dawes, Brian. Letters to author. April to December 2008. MS.
- Dawes, Theda. Letter to Andrae Scurlock. 6 June 2010. MS.
- Erickson, Nick. Letter to author. 10 May 2010. Email.
- Garrels, Josh. "Good Friday." *Over Oceans*. Small Voice, 2006. CD.
- James, Henry. "The Middle Years." *Scribner's Magazine* 13 (May 1893): 620.
- James, Henry. *Bravest of women and finest of friends: Henry James's Letters to Lucy Clifford*. Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, 1999.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation to a Beheading*. First Vintage International Edition. New York: Vintage, 1959.
- Wade, Leslie A. Message to author. 19 May 2010. Email.

APPENDIX: FACULTY EMAILS

Josh,

I wanted to give you a little feedback on your piece, which I did find effective, and thought that it did ably showcase your special talents. On the suggestion side, I might encourage you to continue to experiment with departing from the text, that is, how you might add in your own actions and moments. As is, the movement to the enlightenment moment, where the prisoner emotionally embraces Pierre, comes a bit too quickly. And I think the prisoner's persona needs sharpening--how to give more texture? more intimacy? I note this because the prisoner seems somewhat flat in relation to Pierre, which I think played as the most engaging and strongest element of the piece. When you went into that character, the piece seemed to quicken and gain energy (the bit with the hat was a great device). So my suggestion would be to keep the focus on the relationship between the two, less about the musings and philosophy of the prisoner (I admit I didn't see too much about his efforts in fantasy and creation, as a response to his confinement). To me, the core of the piece concerned the friendship between the two, how conveyed, tested and advanced. You might want to consider charting out key moments or turns in their friendship. This aspect played very well and pulled the audience in. And I think you have a special skill in going back and forth between the two--that seemed to me the theatrical dynamic that enlivened the piece.

So I congratulate you on your work and look forward to where you take it. Thanks for your contribution to the class and for your creativity. Best wishes for the summer,

Leslie A. Wade (Professor of Literature, Theory, and Criticism)

His solo piece was some of the best acting I have seen him do all semester. He seemed more comfortable in his skin on stage. He was simple and honest in his playing of actions, and he seemed more confident in his ability overall to tell a story through character in action.

Nick Erickson (Assistant Professor of Movement and Acting)

VITA

Joshua Ryan Dawes was born and raised in a small town in Indiana. His love for theatre began at a young age when his parents put him in a children's theatre group and by the time he reached the second grade, he told his teachers that he wanted to be an actor when he grew up. Nevertheless, theatre remained nothing more than a hobby through his years in high school. He performed in nearly every theatrical event in high school and he had the opportunity to direct his first plays at the age of eighteen. It was during these years that Joshua participated in his first paid performance, 'Mr. Periwinkle's Christmas Party' at the Oakwood Dinner Theatre.

While deciding where he was going to study during his undergraduate years, Joshua was reluctant to declare a major in theatre, but still wanted to find a university that had a strong theatre program so he could continue to audition and participate in theatre on the side. He chose Huntington University, a private university in Indiana, which had the odd combination of being dedicated to being both a Christian university and a school that excels in the arts. Joshua majored in English education and minored in theatre arts in order to be licensed to teach theatre classes at the high school level. He participated in theatrical productions every semester at college and his passion for theatre continued to grow.

At the end of his first year of undergrad, Joshua was offered a role in a touring production of 'Cotton Patch Gospel' and three years later, the same theatre company, which happened to have the financial backing of Huntington University, hired him to tour again with 'Godspell'. Each of these tours gave approximately fifty performances over a two-month period in over a dozen states and Canadian provinces. During these tours, Joshua discovered that his love for the

stage was deeply rooted and found that the most enjoyable thing that he had ever done was being paid to do the very thing that he loved doing most – performing.

During his time touring with ‘Godspell’, Joshua met Sandy Inbody, casting director for Sight & Sound Theatres in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She invited Joshua to audition for her company after ‘Godspell’ closed. In the fall of 2006, just months after graduation, Joshua auditioned for the company and was cast in the premiere of a musical called ‘In The Beginning’ which was to begin rehearsals the next year. At the same time, Sandy Inbody had been hired by a new theatre in Tennessee called ‘The Miracle Theater’ and offered Joshua a role in another musical premiere. Joshua finished 2006 in Tennessee and packed his bags for Pennsylvania.

After working at these regional theatres for a year, Joshua began auditioning for graduate schools and it was during this time that he first met George Judy and Nick Erickson, who offered him a place in Swine Palace’s Resident Theatre Company and he is currently a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University, which will be conferred at the May 2011 commencement.